

## A Bribe to Escape Moscow

**David Hafemeister**

It was December 1991, the last week of the Soviet Union. Considerable uncertainty was in the air as Ukraine just voted to leave the Soviet Union. It was my task as a member of the American delegation in Moscow to deal with the coming changes on nuclear weapons. The American delegation consisted of nuclear weapon designers and laboratory directors, the CIA, several non-governmental organization scientists and myself, representing the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC). The meetings dealt with implementing the newly-passed Nunn-Lugar legislation to protect nuclear warheads from theft, to dismantle warheads and missiles, to store nuclear materials, to convert weapons-grade uranium into reactor fuel, and to verify the results. After successful high-level meetings in Moscow and Kiev, the US delegation departed.

I stayed on for further discussions at the Soviet Ministry of Defense and the Soviet On-Site Inspection to prepare for the SFRC hearings on the Strategic Arms Reductions Treaty. This forced me to stay two days beyond the length of my visa. I was confident the authorities would honor my government passport and ignore this detail. But life became complicated. Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport was mobbed as Russians and foreigners were fleeing Moscow to avoid the chaos. The panic level was compounded by a lack of jet fuel as the Soviet system started to collapse. As I waited in line, a petite Russian woman came and beat on me with her fist as she thought (incorrectly) that I had a better place in line. Her husband apologized to me as his wife was panicking about obtaining a flight to Soviet Georgia for their family of four.

Finally the Air France line began to move. As I reached the head of the line, I noticed three ominous-looking Soviet soldiers, packing AK-47's. I held my breath and handed them my passport with its outdated visa. My heart sank as they quickly spotted the discrepancy. They pointed towards Moscow and said that I must get a new visa. But how could that really happen as the Soviet Union was crashing, while the new Russian government barely existed? It could take months. Where was I to stay? There were the forthcoming hearings on START, and my family in DC was awaiting my Christmas arrival. At last I thought of something I had never done before (or since). Why not try good old-fashioned bribery? I stuck three ten-dollar bills into my passport and said something in English, which I knew they could not understand. At this time a \$10 bill was worth about \$1000 as the ruble crashed. The senior officer and the two young recruits huddled in the corner. I broke into a sweat. Will they send me to jail? Will they send me back into uncertain Moscow? Happily, they motioned to me to enter the plane. Here we were, former enemies but yet four humans reaching out to survive. After all, these were decent soldiers put into an impossible situation. Their lives were going to get much worse before they got better. I view the \$30-visa expense as a necessary evil for me and as a bonus for the three soldiers and their families. I hoped things worked well for them as I returned to the comforts of the US.

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